Civil Rights History Project
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Interviewee:	Mr. Clifford David Browner, Jr.
Interview Date:	March 9, 2013
Location:	Campus of Albany State University, Albany, Georgia
Interviewer:	Dr. Hasan Kwame Jeffries
Videographer:	Petka Ndaliko
Length:	01:05:31

Videographer: Three, two, and rolling.

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: Good morning.

Clifford David Browner: Good morning.

HJ: Today is Saturday, March 9th, 2013. My name is Dr. Hasan Kwame Jeffries of the Ohio State University and the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I'm with videographer Petka Ndaliko in Albany, Georgia, on the campus of Albany State University to conduct an interview for the Civil Rights History Project, which is a joint undertaking of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture and the Library of Congress. We are here with Dr. Clifford David "Cliff" Browner, Jr. Thank you so much for being here.

CB: Thank you for having me.

HJ: I want to begin this conversation or discussion here with some background information. [Sound of microphones being moved] Mr. Browner, could you tell us when and where you were born?

CB: I was born May 7th, 1947, in Sasser, Georgia. That's in Terrell County.

HJ: And your parents? What were their names?

CB: My father's name was Clifford, and my mother's name was Johnnie Lou.

HJ: Johnnie Lou. And where were they born?

CB: My father was born in Webster County, and my mother was born in Terrell County. Webster is a few miles north of Terrell County.

HJ: Do you know how they met?

CB: I remember her telling me a story. She was at school one day, and it was right after her mother had passed. And her grandmother had sent her to the woodpile to get wood. And she prayed to the Lord to send her somebody that would love her and care for her. And she said she went to school the next day, and my father sat behind her. She said [he] never said anything to her before, but this particular day after she prayed, he touched her on the shoulder and asked her if she thought her grandmother would mind if he came to see her. And that's how they got started.

HJ: You said they met in school?

CB: In school, yes.

HJ: How long were they able to go to school, or how much schooling did they get?

CB: I believe my father told me he completed third grade, and my mother about eighth grade, I believe is correct.

HJ: Your father—he was a sharecropper, no? Or did he—he worked the land?

CB: He started out sharecropping. And I think by the time I was five years old, he came off of the farm and took a job in Albany at Swift Fertilizer plant, which he retired from.

HJ: Okay. So, he worked there for a number of years?

CB: Yes.

HJ: Okay. And how far was Albany from your home?

CB: Ah, roughly twenty miles.

HJ: Did you find as a child growing up that you would often go to Albany? Or did you tend to stay more around your home in Sasser, in Terrell?

CB: There were occasions on weekends, in particular, that he would bring us to the zoo in Albany, and that was a fun day.

HJ: And this, of course, was segregated, right?

CB: Yeah, it was still segregated at that time.

HJ: So, what was your experience like coming to Albany at that time?

CB: Well, actually—I didn't actually run into much segregation, in the sense of the word, because my father kind of kept us shielded from that, to a point. Now, we knew it existed, but, you know, nobody really bothered us as a family. So, you know, some of the things that you would hear about the South, I really didn't experience because of that protection that he put up for us.

HJ: And by protection, how did he do that? What do you mean that nobody bothered you because of this protection?

CB: Well, for one thing, if we went anyplace, our mother had to go. For instance, if we worked during the summers, he only—we could only work if she worked in the same place we worked. So, he made sure that we were always looked after. And, you know, I never had the

opportunity to work for whites in the yard, cutting grass or cutting hedges or things like that, because he didn't allow us to do that because he, you know, wasn't there to look after us. So, he made sure we stayed home unless my mother could actually be there. So, I never really had any really confrontations, per se, as a child, in that respect.

HJ: What was the community like that you grew up in, the *black* community? If you're sheltered from, sort of, you know, being exposed to sort of whites, working and that—what was the community like that you *were* exposed to, that you *were* growing up in?

CB: Well, basically, we lived in an all-black community, of course. There were dirt streets. And, you know, the houses that didn't have paint and most of them were three-room houses. And, you know, of course, there were varied numbers of family members living, you know, in—in our case, there were extended family members there.

So, the community itself was basically black and, you know, we didn't have any real control of what went on. So, if you learned how to live within that setting, you avoided trouble by, for lack of a better way of putting it, staying in your place, so to speak.

HJ: Um-hmm.

CB: So, there were differences. I mean, we were—you know, if we went outside there, we knew there were ways we were supposed to carry ourselves, you know, in front of whites. It was, "Yes sir, no sir. Yes ma'am, no ma'am," whenever we were spoken to.

HJ: And how did you pick up on those? I mean, is this something that your mother said that you have to do? You know, how did you learn those particular ways to interact with white folk?

CB: Well, some of it will start at home, and some of it you picked up from interactions. You saw other people do certain things and, you know, you just followed suit.

HJ: And you weren't the only child? Your parents had how many children total?

CB: I have—there was four of us, two boys and two girls. I have two sisters older, and my brother is older. I was the last child. But my mother raised, and father raised, other children. I had a cousin that lived with us, and her mother, at some point. And my mother raised her baby sister and brother from her mother's marriage.

HJ: So, you had a full household, as you were saying. You grew up with a houseful of people.

CB: Well, pretty much there was always somebody there that really wasn't in our immediate family all through my teenage life, growing up. So, my family always took care of, you know, my cousin and some other people, and there were instances where even brothers-in-law were living with us at some point.

HJ: Now, what elementary school did you go to?

CB: The elementary school I attended was Dunbar Elementary School.

HJ: Dunbar Elementary?

CB: Dunbar, yes, and it's—the site is still there, but the building has been torn down.

HJ: And what was Dunbar like?

CB: Dunbar: white—maybe I should say it *had been* white, but, you know, weather had faded it, so it was a, you know, dull-looking white building. There weren't any indoor facilities. It was heated by a potbellied stove in the middle of the room. And, you know, you went to one class, you pretty much stayed there, and your teacher taught you everything from that classroom. We, as children, had to go out on the hedgerow, as we called it, to cut wood to start the fires in the stoves. And there were underneath the—what we would call a crawlspace now—coal was stored underneath the building.

HJ: Under the building?

CB: Under the building. So, we would go out with buckets and a shovel to get coal to bring it in to keep the fire going in the stove during the wintertime.

HJ: So, this is what you and your classmates would do?

CB: Yes. And, of course, when you—the facilities were outside. They had two facilities, one for boys and one for the girls, outside. There were no indoor facilities, no running water.

HJ: Um. And did your siblings also go to Dunbar as well?

CB: Ah, I think they may not have, because they were older.

HJ: Okay.

CB: You know, because that's been a long while back.

HJ: Right, right.

CB: So, some things I don't remember specifically. But they may not have gone there as much as I did, because I was younger, the youngest one.

HJ: Right. Now, did you stay in Dunbar all the way up until high school?

CB: No. Actually, the first Dunbar—they built a new school in, I think, 1955. And after that, I left there and went to Carver, which is in Dawson, Georgia, which is Carver High School in Dawson, Georgia. And I think I went to eighth grade from Dunbar.

HJ: Okay.

CB: Yeah.

HJ: And how far was Carver, I mean, because that was a little bit further away from where you lived?

CB: Yeah, seven miles.

HJ: And how did you get to school?

CB: School bus.

HJ: School bus, okay.

CB: Yeah, we were bussed from Sasser. The bus would come to Dunbar and pick us up. What they would do, actually: pick the ones up in the country, bring them to Dunbar, and then they would leave there and go to Carver.

HJ: And thinking about the kind of education that you received, the quality of education, reflecting back on it, I mean, what did you—how would [you] say it was? Do you feel that you got a good foundation, that it was just as good as anything you could have gotten? What would you say?

CB: Well, first of all, I believe that if you apply yourself wherever you are, you will get a good education. But, also, you know, we weren't exposed to a lot of stuff. So, it was inferior in that sense that we just didn't get exposed to things that were in other places. Education? [0:10:00] Teachers were concerned about you, and what they were able to teach you, they wanted you to learn that. But, you know, I still say that, in the end, it was an inferior education.

HJ: Did your parents talk much about school to you growing up?

CB: Their concern was that we would get an education, because they knew that was the key to a better life. So, they—you know, we never had to stay out of school to work. That was one of the advantages of my father not being on the farm. They insisted that we go to school. So, when other children had to stay out because the crop was in the field, we didn't have to. So, that was a [benefit to us all] of him not being on the farm.

HJ: Now, your mother, what did she do for—did she work outside of the home?

CB: Yes. She did day labor, domestic labor. She worked, she cooked, took care of the whites' babies, and cleaned house, those kind of things. That was her—and eventually, she

worked at the white elementary school that was in Sasser as a cook. And eventually, she went from there to Dunbar when they built a new school. When they had a lunchroom there, she worked in that lunchroom, and then, eventually, at Carver. She took retirement from the lunchroom at Carver.

HJ: Now, she was working at Sasser—when did she begin working at the white school—at the white school?

CB: She was working at the white school during the time I was in school, so I don't know the year, but it was like—well, it had to have been in the '50s.

HJ: Okay, yeah. So, now, when the—so protests begin. So, the civil rights protests begin in Albany in the, you know, early '60s, 1961. In Terrell, a little bit later, you know, really 1963. You're still young.

CB: Yes.

HJ: You're not quite—you're not in high school yet, are you?

CB: Yes, I'm in high school.

HJ: You are in high school.

CB: Yeah.

HJ: Okay. So, when things begin in Albany first, were you aware of them? You know, how did you become aware of them? Do you remember sort of hearing about them at all? Or the first time you began hearing about things going on?

CB: My parents. My father and mother was involved, and my sister was involved. My older sister, one of my older sisters was involved. So, you know, that's how I knew about the Movement. I didn't initially start out attending mass meetings, but that came later as they moved the mass meeting to the church where we were members.

HJ: And that church was Mount Olive?

CB: Mount Olive Baptist Church in Sasser.

HJ: Now, about Mount Olive, that was your family's church?

CB: Yes.

HJ: Was it a big church, big membership, small church?

CB: Ah, for that time, it was a medium-size, I think, medium membership church for that time. There were four other churches, or five other churches, in the Sasser vicinity. And I think we met on fourth Sundays at the time.

HJ: Met *only* on the fourth Sundays at Mount Olive?

CB: Yes.

HJ: Once a month.

CB: Once a month.

HJ: Now, were your parents active in the church? Any church groups, church memberships, I mean, church—?

CB: My dad, I know, worked in finance. I mean, I can remember as a younger child him counting money, so I know he worked in finance. I don't know if he was ever chairman of the deacon board, but I know he was a deacon there and I know he worked in finance.

HJ: A deacon—you mean, as a trustee working in finance?

CB: Well, they didn't call it that back then, but yeah.

HJ: Right.

CB: He was responsible for getting the money to the bank and that kind of thing.

HJ: And how about your mother?

CB: My mother—I don't remember her holding an office in church during that time, because we—they held membership in two different churches, actually.

HJ: Okay.

CB: But she attended Mount Olive frequently, so people really thought she was a member of Mount Olive. But she actually was a member of Sanders Gift Baptist Church, which is about two or three miles from where we lived. But she was always at Mount Olive, so nobody ever questioned whether she was a member or not.

HJ: Now, your church memories, are they Mount Olive Church memories? Do you remember attending Mount Olive as a child and all that?

CB: Yes. Sunday School, Easter plays, singing in the church choir—you know, in the choir, more or less, more than singing, but in the choir.

HJ: Now, how important was that church life to you and your family?

CB: Well, it was a thing that we believed in doing. We believed that God—we needed God in our lives. And we attended church very often. It wasn't like we went once every two or three months. We went every month to that church. And occasionally I would go with my mother to Sanders Gift. So, church life was important to us. That church was—my father loved that church. And, you know, one of the requests that he made before he died was that—to not to let—for me not to let the church die. [0:15:00] So, that's how important it was to him.

HJ: So, do you recall at all any of the conversation that went into deciding that the church should open its doors to a mass meeting, to the Movement, when it begins organizing in Terrell County?

CB: Well, I wasn't privy to a conversation of that sort, but I know that they had been meeting at Zion Grove, I believe—at Zion Hill, which was in Terrell County, but out from

Dawson. And I was told from conversation that the people in that area was not attending the meeting, so they moved it to Sasser because that's where the bulk of the people were coming from that were going to Zion Hill. And, in fact, the pastor of Zion Hill at the time lived in Sasser. So, they brought it to Mount Olive, where it was closer to where the majority of the people were that were attending. So, that's, you know, pretty much the reason that they moved it.

HJ: And do you remember some of the mass meetings?

CB: Yes.

HJ: At Mount Olive?

CB: At Mount Olive, yes.

HJ: What were they like? What were they like?

CB: They were exciting meetings. I mean, you know, people—the first time I really saw blacks and whites intermingling in a close vicinity that way was at those meetings. And they were spirit-filled a lot of times, or there was scriptures read, or conversations about what went on in other areas of Terrell County or Lee County or Dougherty were brought back on those meeting nights, and you'd hear who had been beaten up or who had been arrested or, you know, who had a confrontation with the sheriff's department or police or a neighbor, whatever. Those kind of things came back, what kind of results they were getting in their mass—in the voter registration drives, you know. So, there were personal stories told, you know, along with the singing.

HJ: And so, now, you were younger. I mean, you were only about what—fifteen? High school?

CB: Fifteen or sixteen.

HJ: So, you couldn't—too young to register to vote.

CB: Right.

HJ: So, what were some of the things that *you* were thinking about doing at the time? In addition to attending the mass meeting, were you doing any other activities? Or was sort of the mass meeting really kind of the focus of your activity?

CB: Well, the mass meeting really was the focus in a lot of ways, but at school Clovis Jones and I wrote a letter to the superintendent. And I can't remember his name at this time. But we wrote a letter to him asking for new books, because the ones we were getting were hand-me-downs from the white school. And, of course, pages were missing and then, little dirty notes written in them, you know, those kinds of things, you know. And they were getting the new books, and then, we would get their old books.

HJ: And this was while you were in high school?

CB: This was while I was in high school. It started out about five of us sat down to write the letter. But when it was time to sign the letter, only Clovis and I signed it. And, of course, we got in trouble with the principle of the school.

HJ: Now, did you let your parents know beforehand that you were writing this letter?

CB: No, I never mentioned the letter being written. They found out about the letter, actually, at the mass meeting, actually.

HJ: And what did they say when they—?

CB: I don't recall any reaction about it. You now, I didn't get scolded for doing it, let's put it that way. And it was talked about in the meetings, about that.

Videographer: Can we have just a small pause, please?

HJ: Oh, yeah.

Videographer: Yeah, I need—

HJ: Have a little pause for a second.

Videographer: Yeah. [0:18:32]

HJ: Okay.

Videographer: [ ]

HJ: Do we need to adjust the mikes at all?

Videographer: No, those are fine.

HJ: Okay.

Videographer: Just—

[Recording stops, silence from 0:18:53 to 0:19:27]

[Recorded resumes at a higher volume with wavering voices, echoes, and loud static]

CB: I was a senior in high school.

HJ: Okay.

CB: So, it would have been—

HJ: Like ’64?

CB: No, no. I was still in high school.

HJ: Okay.

CB: So, that was—I was fifteen or sixteen, because I didn’t turn sixteen until late, until almost ready to—well, I was—when I went into the twelfth grade, I was still sixteen years old.

HJ: Oh, wow. Okay.

CB: So, I would have been fifteen at the time.

Videographer: [ ]

HJ: On both of us? Testing. Testing the sound. Jeffries.

CB: Test. Test. [0:20:00]

[Interview stops for sound adjustment at 0:20:20. Interview resumes at 0:23:17]

HJ: We should have had you read some of your poetry for the test. [Laughter]

CB: [0:23:23] poetry?

HJ: Yeah, we should—[laughs] we'll get there in a minute. I'll ask you about that in a little bit.

CB: You've done your research. I don't remember most of it. I can tell you some titles, and that's about it. [Laughs]

Videographer: Okay, we're good to roll again.

HJ: We're good?

Videographer: Yeah.

HJ: Okay.

Videographer: And three, two, one, and action.

HJ: We paused just for some technical difficulties, but we're just going to pick right back up. When we had left off, you were talking about the letter that you had written to the school superintendent that only you yourself and Clovis Jones signed. Did anything come of it?

CB: We were called into the principal's office and we were threatened.

HJ: By the principal? Do you recall the principal's name?

CB: E. E. Sykes.

HJ: And this is still a segregated school, so this is an all-black school?

CB: Yes, all-black school.

HJ: And what did he say?

CB: He said that we should be put out of school, as simple as that. And he did not put us out of school, but he said that we *should* be put out of school.

HJ: Why?

CB: Because apparently the superintendent had gotten on him because the letter came to his office from us at his school, and he was responsible for us. So, I'm assuming that the superintendent had words with him about it.

HJ: And so, how did that make you feel? You're standing up for what you know is right, and you get called into the principal's office and you're reprimanded.

CB: At the time, [0:25:00] I didn't feel it was fair. I thought that he should have been a part of what we were doing. But as I got older, I understood why he didn't do any more in our favor.

HJ: Why was that?

CB: Because when you have a family and obligations, you look at things a lot differently than when you don't have obligations. If that was happening now, at my age, I don't know if I would take the same stand he took, but I don't know if I would, you know, would have been any different about the letter. You know, I would have suggested they should have come to me with it, rather than going to the superintendent. But I understand his point now. I mean, you know, I hold nothing against him for that.

HJ: So, afterwards, you write the letter and, you know, get called into the principal's office, and what did you do next?

CB: Well, we were treated differently at school after that.

HJ: Treated by who?

CB: Other faculty members. We were told that we were frightening the students and those kind of things. And, you know, they would watch us during recess periods. You know, we had recess back in those days, so we were outside. They would, you know, kind of keep an eye

on us. And actually, I was president of the senior class, and, you know, they kind of forced me to resign. They didn't take it from me, but they put it to me in a way that I knew what they wanted me to do, so I ended up resigning as the president of the senior class [0:26:22] that letter.

HJ: Now, how about your classmates? How did they respond, because clearly people knew that you had written this letter?

CB: Nobody questioned it. I mean, you know, the students—the few that were involved were involved. And the ones who were not, I mean, they didn't question what was going on with it. Nobody asked, "How did you do that?" Or, "How could we get involved?" You know? You know, they stayed away from us a lot. Some of them didn't participate or associate with us—maybe that's a way of putting it—because of that.

HJ: Did you see some of your classmates at mass meetings?

CB: Yes. There were classmates there. Emma Robinson is one that lived next door to us. She was a classmate of mine. And Douglas Edwards—Robert Edwards was a classmate of mine. He attended the meetings. And I'm thinking a young lady named Edith Page attended on occasions. Those are ones I can remember right offhand that were classmates of mine.

HJ: And, to go back to the mass meetings at Mount Olive, your home church, they begin in summer of 1962? Does that sound about—?

CB: I can't verify the exact time they started.

HJ: Okay. But they—once they move over to your home church, Mount Olive, and you're having these mass meetings going on there, and then one night, late that summer, Mount Olive is targeted and burned to the ground.

CB: That's correct.

HJ: When did you hear about the arson?

CB: My uncle, who lives in sight of the church—you can see the church from where my grandparents lived and he lived—saw the fire, came to my dad's house, and woke us up. So, we went to the church that night. But prior to that, a lot of whites came into the church with guns, including the sheriff of the county, you know, during one of the mass meetings. And they walked around and bullied us a little bit, but nobody was—I can't think of anybody being struck or beaten, but just insulted in little quiet ways.

HJ: And you were there?

CB: Yeah, I was there.

HJ: What did you think? I mean, you see the sheriff coming in. Had you had any interaction with the sheriff before, or any of the deputies?

CB: No, had not.

HJ: And this is the county sheriff?

CB: Yes, um-hmm, from the county. He and, you know, his deputies, I guess, and other citizens, other white citizens. They were not dressed in white robes or any of that kind of stuff, but had on regular clothes. But they had their pistols and guns, those kind of things.

HJ: Do you recall the sheriff's name?

CB: Z. T. Mathews is what we called him, is the sheriff's name. For some reason, I wasn't afraid that night. I don't know why, but I wasn't afraid that night. And I remember Reverend Sherrod read from Roman 8 that night.

HJ: Charles Sherrod from SNCC?

CB: Right. "If God be for us, who can be against us." And then, shortly after, the church was burned.

HJ: That night, when you go with your father and you literally see the church in flames—

CB: Actually, it was the morning.

HJ: The morning after.

CB: The church was burned down by the time my father and I got there. The church was burned to the ground. The ashes were still smoldering, and there were hot spots. But, you know, I can remember standing on the ground, saying, "If anybody would burn a church, they'd do anything." And that's one of the statements I remember saying to myself as I stood and watched the smoke.

HJ: Do you remember your father's reaction?

CB: He was hurt. You know, I don't remember any conversation, per se, but I know he was hurt about it. [0:30:00]

HJ: How about others in the community? What was—what did church members sort of say? What was the sentiment?

CB: I don't—you know, as a child, we were not in conversation with adults a lot about things. I mean, we were—when adults talked, we were kind of pushed, not pushed aside, but told to go play. So, some things I didn't hear because of that ruling, you know. But [sighs] I don't remember any real conversation with any church members about it, but I know they were hurt, too. And I remember working with two of the deacons during the time the church was being reconstructed. But, as far as conversation about "I wish we had not," or that kind of thing, I never heard any of that from any of the members. I'm not saying it didn't happen, but I never heard it.

HJ: Right. Was your father or your family ever concerned? I mean, your father is, you know, active in the church that had just been burned down. Your older sister is very active in the Movement. Was there ever any concern for your family's personal safety?

CB: Yes, there were always concerns about that. In fact, I heard rumors that there was talk about burning our house, but there was older folk who lived close to us who were not involved, and they didn't want to harm them. So, that's the reason I *heard* that they didn't burn our house. And I remember my dad making a statement that one of the white women tried to run him off the road as he was going to Albany to work one morning.

HJ: Um.

CB: So, there were threats, you know, I guess I felt.

HJ: Did your father take any, or your mother, or any other family members, take any precautions in case a threat materialized?

CB: Not of any great nature. I mean, they were vigilant in watching, you know. But, other than that, I don't—can't think of anything that we actually did. We didn't go out and buy guns or that kind of thing, if that's what you're asking. No, nothing I remember, only at a level no more than being vigilant. And we were—I can remember being a little bit more restricted from going places at that—from that point.

HJ: In terms of where—in terms of the things that you could do?

CB: Yeah, what I could do. Yeah.

HJ: Kind of being out of eyesight.

CB: Yeah.

HJ: So, after—was there any conversation among, or reaction among, kids your age after these series of churches are burned down? The school is just about to begin, I mean, because this happened sort of late summer. Do you recall anything or any talk among those kids at all?

CB: No, no, none. The kids that were involved were involved. And, you know, we—basically just about the mass meetings, and we enjoyed them, and that's pretty much the

conversation. Nothing about the church, per se, or, you know, evil or that kind of thing. Nobody—I don't remember any conversations about that.

HJ: Now, when you—you do very well in high school, but then, when you graduate, you decide to join the Army.

CB: Yes.

HJ: What was behind that decision?

CB: Well, for one thing, my father could not afford to send me to college. He and I had the conversation one morning. He said, you know, "Baby, I just can't afford to pay for college." I said, "Don't worry about it, Dad. I'll take care of it."

And at the time, the recruiters were coming in, you know, for the military. And I sat for the exam, passed the exam. And my cousin, one of my cousins, took the exam, as well, and a couple of other people. I can't remember them. But my cousin didn't pass the exam; that's why he didn't go. But I remember M. C. Ferguson and Clyde Foster were classmates of mine. We went in at the same time and took our basic training at the same time.

And the college thing came about. The military was an option for me, because I thought I could save money for college, and that's why I joined the military.

HJ: And so, this was 1965?

CB: '64.

HJ: '64, okay.

CB: Yeah. July of '64 is when I actually went into the military.

HJ: And where did you do your basic training?

CB: Fort Gordon, Georgia, and my advanced training was at Fort Knox, Kentucky.

HJ: What did you think about leaving home? Was this your first time, sort of an extended time, first extended time away from Sasser and Terrell County?

CB: Actually, this was the second night, the second time I had ever spent a night out of my mother's house. The first time I—well, actually, the third, now, I'll say the third. The first time was to march on Washington. I went to Washington to March on Washington, so I was away. The second time, I went to Atlanta for the physical for my military exam. And, then, going into the military. So, actually, I never spent any time out of my mother's house. Every night, I spent in my mother's house, except for those three instances.

HJ: Wow. Well, let's back up for a quick second, because I do want to come back to the military experience, but the March on Washington—[0:35:00] so, how does that—how do you wind up going up to Washington, D.C., and this is August of 1963? How does that happen?

CB: Reverend Sherrod came to me and asked me if I wanted to go. And he said, you know, "I have a ticket for you." But at the time, I was working on the church.

HJ: Working on Mount Olive?

CB: Mount Olive, yeah.

HJ: Helping to rebuild it?

CB: Rebuild the church, yeah. That was my first job I ever had where I made an hourly wage. Before that, you were paid by the day or by the poundage—if, you know, when you picked cotton during the summer, they paid two dollars a hundred; in other words, you picked a hundred pounds of cotton, you got two dollars. I remember working on the streets of Sasser with a guy named Charlie Jordan, who dried seeds, grass seeds. And he paid us five dollars a day for handling seed bags and drying and those kinds of things.

HJ: Charlie Jordan?

CB: Yeah, he was a white guy that had a seed business on the streets of Sasser. But working for the church, I think Mr. Blalock was paying us a dollar forty an hour, and that was the first hourly wage I ever earned.

HJ: Um.

CB: And I worked with him on all three churches that were burned during that time.

HJ: Um.

CB: Yeah. During the time the church was being built, you know, I earned money. I had money earned enough to go to Washington to have my own spending money, but the ticket was provided for the train. We left from [0:36:21] on the train.

HJ: And took it up to D.C.?

CB: Yes. I think we went to Jacksonville first and then went up the Coast.

HJ: Okay.

CB: I think that was the route.

HJ: So, that's your first train ride?

CB: First train ride.

HJ: Do you remember it?

CB: Yeah! [Laughs] When we left here, it was warm. So, unfortunately, I didn't have a jacket. Black slacks, white shirt, short-sleeved shirt. And when I get to Washington, of course, it's cold. [Laughs] So, that was an experience. I hadn't thought about the season, or the weather being that different, you know, because we didn't have a TV or radio. Communication was limited. We didn't read newspapers except for the Pittsburgh *Courier*.

HJ: Pittsburgh *Courier*.

CB: And, you know, we didn't get those often. So, I had no concept about what the weather was like anyplace else. And, you know, since it was August here, you know, I thought the weather was the same there. And nobody told me. Nobody knew. And my family didn't know, I guess, because my mother didn't insist that I take a jacket.

HJ: Now, did you go by yourself?

CB: Yes.

HJ: Solely—?

CB: Just me.

HJ: And so, you arrive at the train station in D.C. And how do you make your way over to the Mall?

CB: Well, we all went in a group.

HJ: Okay.

CB: You know, it was a group of people. There was a group of people that left here together. I had seen some of them from the Movement, but not really friends. I didn't have any personal friends on the train with me. So, pretty much, I was alone. So, when we got to the train station, we en mass went to the Mall, and from that, from one event to the other, until we heard the speech.

HJ: Now, what were you doing over the course of the day?

CB: Just walking. Basically, walking and listening, awed to be among that many people. You know, I'd never seen that many people in one place at one time. It was an experience. And to hear the bands that played and the speeches that were given, and to see people who were quote-unquote "famous," but you might not know them by name: the Carpenters were there, I believe, Peter, Paul and Mary, I think.

HJ: Um-hmm.

CB: Yeah, yeah. Dr. King gave the speech, of course. And Jesse Jackson and some other people that I recognized from coming in and out during the Movement.

HJ: Um, like John Lewis.

CB: Yeah, John Lewis. But other than that, you know, I was pretty much alone and just enjoying the day for what it was worth. Had no idea the impact that we were making! Had I known how important that day was I would have saved something, the buttons and those kind of things that were there. So, I don't have any of that anymore, only the memories of it.

HJ: And so, after—afterward, right? I mean, the speeches are done, you're on the Mall, and it's just time to go? You just pack up and head on?

CB: We just go back to the train, because we didn't take luggage. We go back to the train, get on the train, and come back home. Just a train ride, and that's about it. [Laughs]

HJ: What did you think of Washington, D.C.?

CB: Didn't see much of it, except for, you know, the part—because there were so many people you could only see what was right in front of you, actually, and most of the time, that was somebody else's back. So, as far as the monuments and those kinds of things, you really didn't get to see that, in the sense of the word, not to actually enjoy. You just knew that they were there, that's all.

HJ: Were people curious about your experience when you came back home?

CB: Not really. Nobody really asked, that I can remember, asking me, you know, "How was it?" Or, "What did you learn?" That kind of thing nobody asked. [0:40:00]

HJ: Now, had you seen King before down here?

CB: Um, I remember him coming to Mount Olive during the time the church had burned and standing on the grounds there. That was the first, I think, and the only time I actually saw him in person like that, was actually at that church after it burned.

HJ: So, Washington, D.C., was one of the first times you'd spent the night away from your mother's home, out from under your mother's roof. The second time you go up for the physical.

CB: Yes.

HJ: The third time, you're not coming back.

CB: Right.

HJ: I mean, you're about to—you're in the Army. What was basic training like?

CB: Basic training was fun, actually. I played basketball in high school, so I was still in shape. And, you know, I wasn't intimidated. Basic training was—it was rigorous, but fun. I learned a lot. How to—I like to say I was timid, a little bit, before that, and it helped me to kind of kind of redefine my personality, and it was a good thing for me, I think. Matter of fact, I believe that all young men ought to have the ability to spend those two years, minus the war thing, of course, you know. But it's a good training ground for young men to get a footing, as to being responsible for themselves, and being able to work with a group of people, and take orders and be responsible for other people.

HJ: Now, your unit—was it mostly black, black and white?

CB: Mixed.

HJ: Mixed, yeah.

CB: Spanish American, you know, Puerto Ricans.

HJ: Now, was this your first time in a group that was as racially diverse as that?

CB: Yes.

HJ: What'd you think? I mean, here you're coming from rural—?

CB: I never thought about it any other way. I mean, it wasn't like I had any special regard or special concerns, you know. You just—you do what you're supposed to do and you demand that people respect your space, and that's pretty much it, and you respect theirs. So, really, I didn't see it as a problem. Actually, it was a good experience.

HJ: And where are you stationed afterwards? You finish basic training, and then they send you where?

CB: To Fort Knox, Kentucky.

HJ: Okay.

CB: At Fort Knox, Kentucky, I was assigned to communications. We learned how to repair radios, and it was for armored vehicles, so I ended up going to an Armor Unit when I left there. We went to Germany. So, it was armor communications training.

HJ: And you were sent over to West Germany?

CB: West Germany. I went to what they call Harvey Barracks, which is in Kitzingen, Germany, and that's where I spent twenty-nine months of my service time there.

HJ: So, over two years?

CB: Yes.

HJ: Twenty-nine months.

CB: Roughly two and a half years, roughly.

HJ: So, now, not only are you not in Terrell County under your mama's roof, but you're not even in the United States anymore.

CB: Right.

HJ: Was it a shock?

CB: No, no more than the culture. Matter of fact, we were, when we were in basic training—I'm going to back up a step—there were twenty-one or so young white guys who were going to OCS, Officers Training School, and they were acting as squad leaders and those kind of things in our basic training unit. And my immediate squad leader said to me one day—he had a seventeen-year-old brother. He said, "I wish that he was anything like you are. He could not do this." He said, "But here you are, seventeen, and you're doing this! And you're not crying, you're not calling home, you're not whining." You know? He said, "My kid brother couldn't do this." He said, "I wish he could see you and see how well you're handling this."

And getting to Germany, somebody was always there, you know. I tell kids these days, if you're respectful, you're honest and kind, people will look after you. And everywhere I went, there was always an older person who said, "We're going to take care of you," because they saw how young I was, and they'd make sure that nothing happened to me. So, that was my Germany experience.

HJ: And did you get out and travel much while you were overseas?

CB: No, I didn't travel much in Germany. Obvious reasons, you know: didn't speak the language, was young. Had I been from a larger city and used to those kind of things, I might have traveled more, but I didn't. I went to Frankfurt and Nuremberg a couple of times, and that's pretty much the extent of my traveling.

HJ: Did you hear much while you were overseas, while you were stationed over in Germany, did you hear much about what was going on back home, either in Sasser or, you know, [0:45:00] in the area, in Southwest Georgia, or even with the Movement as a whole?

CB: Not a lot, not a whole lot. Letters home were basically, "I'm fine," you know. My mother would send me boxes with cake and pecans and peanuts and those kind of things that I couldn't get there, but that was pretty much it. Not a lot of information about the news of what was going on back home, you know, in the Movement.

HJ: Right. So, you do two and a half, about two and a half years or so, you come out, and you come back home.

CB: Yes.

HJ: Had much changed since you had been gone?

CB: I can remember being awed by the lights and those kind of things, like, "Wow, this is what I left." You know, got home, things had changed a little bit. They were talking about integrating the schools and those kind of things. But there were—not a lot economically had changed, though. And that was the biggest shock, that not a lot economically had changed.

I had changed. I was not willing to endure some of the things I had endured before. I wanted more out of life. And that's what changed most, you know. The surroundings hadn't that much—well, except for my father had built another house on the spot that we had the old house, and we were, I think, probably the first on the street to actually have an indoor bathroom.

HJ: But you say *you* had—so, some things had changed, right?

CB: Yeah.

HJ: I mean, your family's—the way you live and how you live, that had changed. But you say *you* had changed.

CB: Yeah.

HJ: What changed you?

CB: Well, when you go other places and you talk to other people, and they're doing different things, like, you know, you meet guys from Chi-Town and Boulder City and, you know, those kinds of things, and they're talking about what they did. I got introduced to jazz. Matter of fact, the friend of mine that I met that introduced me to jazz, I actually saw him forty-one years later, last year.

HJ: Wow.

CB: For the first time since he left Germany. So, you know, I got introduced to jazz. You know, basically we had heard country and western music, and rock 'n roll, a little rock 'n roll, at [0:47:15]. Never heard jazz, and I got introduced to jazz by these people, those kind of things, so—and talking about what they did there and what was available there. Of course, not all of it was true, but, you know, it gave you something to look forward to. Yeah. So, I knew I needed an education to get that done.

HJ: And so, you come back home. Why did you choose to come back to Terrell County?

CB: Um, it was *home*, and I needed to do that. Actually, that's interesting you ask me that, because my brother was in Detroit at the time, with my father's brothers and sisters. And he was waiting for me to come to Detroit. My mother's youngest brother that she raised was living in Philadelphia with his father-in-law. He wanted me to come to Philadelphia. So, I actually did go to Philadelphia and spend a week with him, but I came back. I said, "I've got to go home."

So, I ended up in Dawson. I applied for college at Tennessee State. And I had been accepted, but I would have had to wait until January to get into college. And Albany State was willing to take me in September. So, I was afraid if I waited the other three months that I might not attend, so I came to Albany State.

HJ: And then, you wind up staying there for the full four years?

CB: Yeah.

HJ: Now, Albany State had been, I mean, a hotbed of sort of student protests just a few years earlier.

CB: Right.

HJ: What was the climate like when you came back, when you enrolled?

CB: It was relatively quiet. I mean, there were a couple of instances where some of the students went across the bridge, but I wasn't involved in that, because I wasn't on campus. But I heard about it. But relatively quiet, but a few little things here and there were happening.

HJ: Did you stay at home, or where did you live?

CB: I lived at home for the first quarter, and then I moved to Albany with—well, a homeboy lived here, so we got a little apartment down on McKinley, and that's where I stayed until I graduated.

HJ: And what did you major in?

CB: Sociology.

HJ: Why did you choose sociology?

CB: Um, didn't quite know what I wanted to do, and that was a kind of an in-between degree. I really was torn with going to law school, so sociology was kind of an offshoot that I just took, because I didn't know what else I wanted to do.

HJ: What was Albany like, the city, the town, while you were a student?

CB: Um, still segregated, but you could pretty much go where you wanted to go, you know, within reason. There weren't any big clubs or any of that kind of thing. [0:50:00] You know, it was still segregated. And we had black policemen at the time, of course, downtown. I

remember having a confrontation with one of them at one point. But, you know, it was still pretty much the South. Nothing much—

HJ: Having a confrontation? A run-in with the black police?

CB: Yeah, with a black policeman. He pulled me over at the traffic light and he said I had run the light. I said, "I didn't." He said, "Well, you ran the light." Well, from where I sat, the light was still, you know, hadn't, you know, the caution light had just come on when I went under it. So, you know, after a few minutes, he told me to go ahead. But that was the only confrontation.

HJ: Was your dad still working in Albany at the time?

CB: Yes. He was still working at Swift's.

HJ: Would you see him at all?

CB: Yeah, I would go to the plant. And [sighs] where he worked—[speaking with emotion] where he worked, there were—they made fertilizer. And I couldn't see him until I got right up on him, it was so much dust in the place.

HJ: Um.

CB: And those were the conditions that he worked under. [Clears throat] Thank you. [Pause] He worked under extreme conditions. But he didn't have the education, so he had to work where he could get a job. [Clears throat]

HJ: Did—you said you had some uncles who had—an uncle in Philadelphia. So, you had family outside of the South?

CB: Yes.

HJ: But your father and your mother, they never thought about leaving?

CB: Yes, my father did. My mother didn't. She told me that he wanted to move to Detroit where his brothers were, but she said she wouldn't go, so he stayed, too.

HJ: What was your mother's reasoning behind not wanting to leave?

CB: I remember her saying something like he was not going to take her to Detroit and put her in an upstairs apartment, [laughing] and that was about the extent of what she said about it.

HJ: [Laughs] What was your father's interest in leaving? Why did he want to go?

CB: Well, his brothers were there. His brothers and sister were there, except for two that were still here. But the others—the rest of them were in Detroit. How they got there, I really don't know. We never discussed how they ended up there. So, I really don't know how they got there, but that's where they were. So, he wanted to go.

HJ: Looking back at your college experience, because eventually you will go. After college, you will head up to Michigan, to Flint, right?

CB: Right.

HJ: But before you get there, looking back at your college, the time you spent there, was it good?

CB: I enjoyed college. You know, well, let me say this: Every semester, I'd say, "I'm not going back." Because, see, I worked two part-time jobs, and a lot of times, I would be too tired to study. And a test would—it would be test time, and I'd say, "Oh, man, I've got to—." And then, I'd end up cramming for tests. So, I said, "I'm not going back." And then, I would get through the test okay and then I'd be satisfied. You know, I would go back and register again. But it was always hard at that time.

So, I enjoyed college, but I didn't get to participate in a lot of the extracurricular activities because I had to work. So, homecoming, you know, weekly basketball games—maybe I may

have seen a halftime of one game, maybe one homecoming, because if I worked—because I worked every other weekend. So, every time homecoming was, it was on a Saturday, and I was—some of those Saturdays I had to work, so I didn't get to attend.

HJ: So, you finish up, you earn your degree in sociology, and you head up to Flint, Michigan.

CB: Yes.

HJ: Why Flint?

CB: Douglas Edwards, a very good friend of mine. We grew up pretty much in the church together. His dad was a deacon in the church, at Mount Olive, and he was one of the ones that was present the night the sheriff came in. He and I were friends from high school. But before that, I had gotten a job at Reidsville State Prison, recruited by the State of Georgia.

HJ: And where's that located?

CB: Reidsville?

HJ: Yeah.

CB: It's out towards Savannah.

HJ: Okay.

CB: It's west—east of here. It's east of here, going towards Savannah. But anyway, I got recruited to work in what they call an ex-offender program as a counselor. And the warden saw me the first day. He told me, said, "I'm going to get rid of you." And my statement to him was, "Whatever makes you happy." And in four months time, I was gone. So—

HJ: So, he—the warden didn't want you there?

CB: No. I was the first black to go there as anything other than an inmate. I didn't work for the prison system. I worked for the State of Georgia Labor Department. And our office was

actually across the street from the camp, but we had to go over to the chapel to do our interviews. And, you know, I don't know what his problem was. Maybe he was afraid, you know, some information would get out. I don't really know what his problem was, but he told me, "I'm going to get rid of you." And in four months time, I was gone.

So, Douglas had been down. He worked for General Motors at the time, doing recruiting for General Motors. [0:55:00] So, he graduated before me at Albany State. And, you know, during the time he was here, we got together. He said, "Man, why don't you come up to see me? I live in—I'm in Flint. You know, why don't you come up to see me when you—you're not going to be doing anything this summer anyway." And, you know, I had just lost—

HJ: So, you saw him after you graduated?

CB: Yes.

HJ: Okay.

CB: I had just lost the job at Reidsville. So, I, "Eh, I might do it," and I really didn't give it that much thought. I really had no intention of driving that far, because it's—Flint is about fifteen hours, I think, north of here. But after the job thing happened, I remembered the fellow told me to come to see him. So, I went through my wallet, found his phone number, and called him. "Yeah, come on up!"

So, I left home. My dad had signed for me to get a 1966 Malibu, Chevelle Malibu, dark blue. And I got in the car with about eighty dollars in my pocket and I drove to Flint. And I stayed there with him for about a month, I guess, and he said, "You're not going home. Why don't you start looking for a job?" [Laughter] So, they worked at—so, you know, they called around some of the other plants. And I started doing interviews and eventually I got a job.

HJ: And where did you begin working?

CB: At Chevrolet truck assembly at General Motors.

HJ: And where was that? In Flint?

CB: In Flint, Michigan, actually.

HJ: And what were you doing?

CB: I started out in tire keeping, then they shifted me to the accounting department. And one day, I went in and resigned.

HJ: Now, how long did you work—how long did you work there before you—?

CB: At the truck assembly, I think, a year. And I went into the computer room to operate computers, and they assigned me to a desk doing accounts payables. And [laughs] it's a funny thing. The only—there were two other black girls that came from Mississippi that they had recruited that were actually accounting majors. I did not have a major in accounting, okay? So, it's not my major, but I'm in accounting, so it really wasn't enjoyable work.

And all I heard from the older women there: "Ooo, I wouldn't wear that rag anyplace," or "My son married this sorry—my daughter-in-law, she's so lazy," and "Oh, I've got the most beautiful grandchild!" And those were the kind of conversations that went on behind me all day long, and I just—one day, I couldn't take any more of it. [Laughing] So, I wrote a two-line resignation and gave it to the comptroller and left.

HJ: And so, do you stay up in Flint there?

CB: I stayed in Flint.

HJ: Okay.

CB: Yeah, I—and leaving Flint that day, around noon, I went downtown. And Doug had started to work for Equitable Life Insurance Company, and I remembered that he said he worked in the Mott Building. So, I just happened to be downtown. I said, "Oh, there's the Mott Building.

I'll go up and see my man." So, I went upstairs. And we sat down, just like we're talking. And in a few minutes, he said, "What are you doing downtown? Aren't you supposed to be at work?" I said, "I quit today." And, you know, of course, his mouth dropped open. "You quit your job?" "Yeah." Called his manager in, he interviewed me and hired me!

HJ: Right there?

CB: Right there, to sell insurance.

HJ: So, you were unemployed for about five hours. [Laughter]

CB: [Laughing] Yeah, about five hours. So, he hired me to sell insurance. Of course, Doug started to train me. So, I sold insurance for about three years, for Equitable, and won a few campaign trips, and got pretty good at it, actually. And when I decided to move back to Atlanta, then I went back to General Motors, because I had worked for them before, to get a transfer. So, that's how I got to Atlanta, and I had a job when I got there.

HJ: And where were you working in Atlanta?

CB: I worked for General Motors in Atlanta.

HJ: Okay, at what plant?

CB: At Doraville.

HJ: Doraville.

CB: Yeah.

HJ: Right north of Atlanta.

CB: Yeah, north of Atlanta. That's where I worked until I was involved in a head-on collision in December of '95, and they retired me after that.

HJ: So, you worked at the Doraville plant for twenty years?

CB: Twenty years, better of twenty years, yeah.

HJ: And where were you living at the time?

CB: In Duri – um, in Decatur.

HJ: In Decatur?

CB: Yeah.

HJ: Atlanta's a little different than Terrell County, even in the '70s and '80s.

CB: Um-hmm.

HJ: What was that experience like?

CB: Didn't like the traffic, but it was a place to be—I really wanted to be here. And I actually came back a couple of times to find a job, and, you know, pressures took me back. But—and that was okay. It was a place to live and a place to work. And every chance I got, I came home. Matter of fact, one year I came home every weekend for a whole year. So, that's how much I liked Atlanta. [Laughs] But it was okay, you know, it was a place to live.

HJ: And so, after the accident, you retire from Doraville, and you come back. [1:00:00] You do move back to Terrell County. So, now, you're back home.

CB: Right.

HJ: I had asked you before had home changed much when you had gone away to the war, and you said it hadn't changed that much. When you come back from Atlanta, had home changed much?

CB: Not really, not economically. People were still farming. Except that, um, they weren't sharecropping anymore. They were business farmers now. And they were hiring blacks to drive tractors and, you know, paying them by the month, that kind of thing. So, it was different. Because during the Movement, they tore down all the raggedy houses that they had, the

shacks, and ran the black folk off, because they were asking to register to vote. So, that was their way of getting rid of them. So, they ended up—

HJ: These are the white landowners?

CB: White landowners. So, they ended up then having to become business farmers and, you know, buy machinery, that kind of thing. So, cotton pickers, peanut combines, and those kind of things were more prevalent than what I remember. The mule and wagon was gone. You know, people—when I was growing up, you know, people plowed the field with a mule. And, you know, we rode on a wagon with a mule attached, you know. But after that, you know, it was like trucks, tractors, those kind of things were used for farming. And one or two little industries, but pretty much the same, economically still depressed.

HJ: How about politically? Was there—now people are able to register to vote?

CB: Right. There was still a problem with that. I mean, there were still ways found to make it difficult. Yeah, more people were registering. There were blacks here and there that had gotten office. But, you know, it was pretty much the same. I didn't see any real outstanding changes, let's put it that way. My brother liked to make the statement: It really doesn't matter who's driving the wagon; it's always going to end up in the same place. And that's pretty much what I—you know, the way it is, really.

HJ: Mr. Browner, we've covered a lot, and you've shared a lot. Is there anything that you would like to add that we skipped over?

CB: We can do a lot more things now than we ever did, even in small towns. You're not threatened just for walking the street. You don't see the "white/black" water fountains or "whites in this door, blacks in that door." You don't see that kind of separation. But we're still separate. So, on the surface, we look as if we—it looks as if—it appears that we have really gained a lot,

but sometimes I wonder really how much of it we really have gained. Because behind the scenes, things still haven't changed much.

I can remember a guy asking me when I worked in Flint what difference did I see between the South and the North. And I asked him, I said, "You really want my answer?" He said, "Yeah, I want your answer." I said, "You sure?" He said, "Yes."

I said, "Well, it's like this. Here, I'm able to visit you at your house, maybe have a meal with you. And then, when I leave, you probably break the plate or the glass that I use. There, I already know I'm not going to be invited, so I understand more about where my position is, so I don't have to—"

HJ: This is a white guy.

CB: White guy, yeah. "So I don't have to question whether you like me or not. I know you don't. You know. So, I don't have to expose myself to you." Well, he got mad at me and, you know, [laughs] he didn't speak to me for a week. But that's the difference I see between the North and the South. There's a perceived freedom, but it really is not there sometimes. It's perceived. But underneath, it's really a lie.

In a lot of ways, I like the South better, because I don't have to question, I don't have to expose myself. I already know where I'm accepted, pretty much, and it's up to me whether or not I want to venture past that or not. But there you're kind of given that false security that you can do these things, you know. And that's the difference I see between South and North.

And there, it's more economic separation than it is white/black separation here. You know, it's just a difference in races here, but there if you don't have the money—and the way they separate there, they just take the money and go to separate you with it. And it's happening

here. We have—you ask about conditions. We have black mayors, but the economics are gone. The base for supporting the city has gone to the suburbs.

HJ: The tax base?

CB: Yeah, um-hmm. So, you can't very well do much if you don't have money. And then, we're accused of not being [1:05:00] good stewards. But how can you be a good—?

HJ: Of the city and the town?

CB: Yeah. How can you be a good steward when you don't have funds to operate? Your infrastructure is gone. You know, people complain about this, that, and the other, but there's not money to—I mean, the tax base is gone. So, you can't very well repair it.

HJ: Well, Mr. Browner, thank you very much. This has been wonderful.

CB: Thank you.

[Recording ends at 1:05:31]

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Sally C. Council